

# Selecting the Right Car Seat

## Stages of Car Seat Use

The **SAFEST** car seat for your child is the one that . . .

### Fits your child

Car seats are designed for children of average size. Your own child's size and needs may vary. Make sure your child is within the car seat weight and height guidelines. Check labels and instructions.

### Fits your car

Not every car seat can be installed correctly in every car. Make sure the car seat fits correctly in your car before using it with your child. If you need help, go to a local car seat checkup event or inspection station (see Resources).

### Is easy for YOU to use correctly every time

Find a child car seat that is easy for you to use properly every time. The easier it is for you to use, the more likely it is you will use it correctly every time you travel.

## Stage 1: Rear-facing Car Seat



**Birth up to at least 18 to 24 months**

**Infant car seat:** rear facing only up to 22 to 35 pounds; small and easy to carry.

**Convertible car seat:** use rear facing up to 30 to 45 pounds; large, stays in car; can be used forward facing when baby is much older and bigger.

**Car bed:** for newborns with medical needs to lie flat.

## Stage 2: Forward-Facing Car Seat with Harness



**Over 18 months** (at least over age 1 **AND** over 20 pounds), **up to 40 to 90 pounds**

**Convertible, forward-facing-only seat, built-in child seat, or vest:** most fit up to 40 pounds, some go up to 60 to 90 pounds.

**Combination Seat:** use with the harness up to 40 to 80 pounds; can be used without the harness as a booster seat when child is older and heavier.

## Stage 3: Booster Seat with Lap-Shoulder Belt



**Over at least 35 to 40 pounds; up to 8–10 years**

**Use a booster only with a lap-shoulder belt;** some boosters fit child up to 120 pounds (check label); use until a lap-shoulder belt fits well (see below).

**If no shoulder belt is available or if the child is too young to sit still in a booster,** use a car seat or vest for children over 40 pounds (see Resources).

## Stage 4: Lap-Shoulder Belt That Fits Well

**Over 8–10 years;** use the 5-Step Seat Belt Fit Test by SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. (see Resources); some children need a booster even longer.

## Crash Testing and Ratings

Every kind of car safety seat (car seat) sold in the United States is required by law to pass tough crash tests. These tests show what would happen if a car was driven into a brick wall at high speed. This is a much more serious kind of crash than most people will ever be in. All car seats that pass these tests are safe to use.

Most, if not all, car seat makers do more testing with even tougher crash tests to make sure their car seats are safe.

There are also several rating programs for car seats, such as *Consumer Reports*, *Baby Bargains*, IIHS fit rating, and the NHTSA Ease-of-Use-Ratings. Most programs are based on how easy the testers thought the car seats were to use. *Consumer Reports* and IIHS also do some crash testing.

Rating programs can be helpful. Be aware, though, that a “best pick” may not be the best car seat to fit *your* child and *your* car. Sometimes one rated poorly for fit may be a good fit for your child.

See page 2 for more information on choosing a car seat.

**Make  
Every Ride  
A Safe Ride**

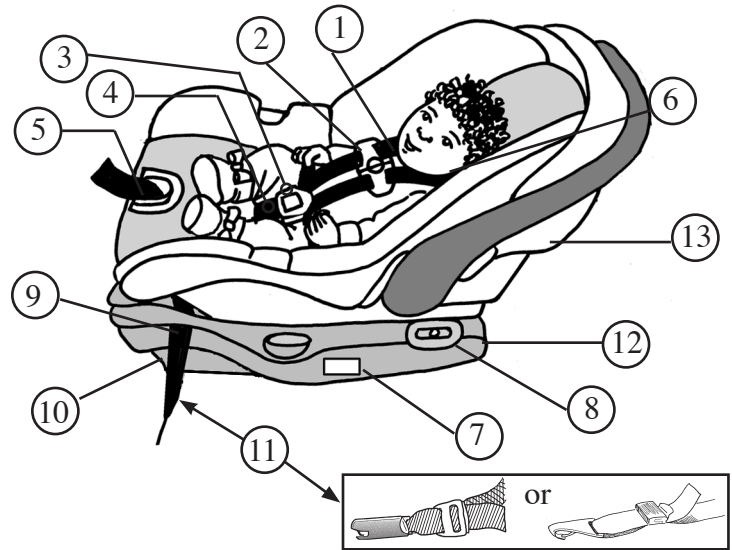


## Car seat features to look for:

- **Good size limits:** Check labels and the manual for height and weight limits that allow your child to use the car seat for a long time.
  - **Infant seat:** It can be used for babies under 5 pounds (if needed). It can be used until baby is 30 inches.\*
  - **Convertible seat:** It can go rear facing to at least 30 pounds and forward facing over 40 pounds.
  - **Forward-facing-only seat:** It can be used over 40 pounds and has a high upper harness position.
  - **Booster:** It can be used over 80 pounds.

*\*Note: This is the maximum standing height. Some babies may outgrow a car seat in seated height before reaching this limit.*

- **Harness:** A 5-point harness (with shoulder, hip, and crotch straps). On an infant seat, this helps keep baby in position better than a 3-point harness. On a convertible seat, a 5-point harness may fit better and allow longer use than one with a shield (tray).
- **Harness buckle:** It should be easy to buckle and unbuckle. Buckles are required to be stiff enough so kids cannot unbuckle them. Some buttons also are hard for adults to push, especially people with arthritis.
- **Harness adjuster:** A front harness adjuster is easier to use than one on the back of the car seat.
- **Harness chest clip:** Easy to open and close.
- **Seat belt slots (belt path):** Openings for the seat belt that are big enough to fit your hands in easily. LATCH straps usually use the same path.
- **Seat belt lock-off:** Some car seats have a part that locks onto the lap or shoulder belt. Check the instructions about use. Make sure it is easy to use.
- **Lower LATCH connectors:** Check your car manual to see if your car has LATCH. If so, find a car seat with connectors that is easy for you to use. Connectors that push on and release with a push-button are usually easiest.
- **Level (recline) indicators (on rear-facing seats):** They should be easy for you to see and understand.
- **Level adjuster (on rear-facing seats):** Make sure it is easy to adjust the tilt of the car seat so that baby's head doesn't flop forward. A young baby can have trouble breathing if her head flops forward.



### Parts of a car seat:

- |                      |                              |   |
|----------------------|------------------------------|---|
| 1. Harness (5 point) | 6. Shoulder harness slots    | 10. Recline foot                                    |
| 2. Chest clip        | 7. Labels                    | 11. LATCH straps (lower attachments and connectors) |
| 3. Buckle            | 8. Level (recline) indicator | 12. Base (infant seats)                             |
| 4. Crotch strap      | 9. Seat belt path            | 13. Shell/carrier                                   |
| 5. Harness adjuster  |                              |   |

## Try before you buy

If possible, take the car seat to your car and install it before buying it. **Always** follow the instructions of the car seat and the car owner's manual. Make sure it can be installed tightly. To check this, hold the car seat at the belt path. Pull side to side and forward. It should not move more than 1 inch.

## Check a second-hand car seat carefully

A used car seat may have hidden safety problems. Make sure all recalls (if any) have been repaired and that the seat has all its parts and instructions. If the car seat has been in a crash, it should not be used again. Check for an expiration date. If none, avoid using a car seat over 6 years old. **Newer car seats are easier to use and often have better safety features.**

## Don't move to the next stage too early

Rear-facing seats (Stage 1) protect children the best, so keep babies and toddlers rear facing as long as possible. Keep children in a car seat with a harness as long as possible. Keep older children in a booster until the seat belt fits properly. Seat belts (Stage 4) are made for adults and do not protect young children well.

## Resources

NHTSA Auto Safety Hotline, general car seat information, recalls, crash testing, Ease-of-Use Ratings: 888-327-4236, 800-424-9153(tty), [www.safercar.gov](http://www.safercar.gov)

SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.: 5-Step Seat Belt Fit Test, recall list, list of car seats for use over 40 pounds, [www.carseat.org](http://www.carseat.org); Helpline, 800-745-7233

Find a Child Passenger Safety Technician: 866-732-8243 or [www.seatcheck.org](http://www.seatcheck.org)

The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia: [www.chop.edu/carseat](http://www.chop.edu/carseat)

American Academy of Pediatrics: [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)